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The Task of Chesterton's Hermeneutic

In Defense of Human Dignity

If Chesterton is a difficult writer to pin down, it is probably because, as Dale Ahlquist suggests, his subject is “everything.”¹ He deems anything that crosses his path to be something worth contemplating and discussing. He is aware of the richness and complication that is interwoven into the human story, and is therefore reluctant to present too constricted a view of that richness and complication.² Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that Chesterton uses a “narrow compass” to “focus a large range of material” towards the “great labor of synthesis and reconstruction.”³ This narrow compass is a particular kind of moral philosophy, which operates from a single point of departure and return. It is the idea of the “dignity of man” or “human dignity,” which he regards as the foremost articulation of the goodness that grounds all of reality.⁴

Chesterton declares, “This is an age in which we must defend human dignity.”⁵ Marshall McLuhan suggests that for Chesterton, “[human] existence has a value utterly . . . superior to any arguments for optimism or

1. Ahlquist, *G. K. Chesterton*, 19.

2. Chesterton, *All Things Considered*, 107; Maycock, “Introduction,” 79.

3. McLuhan, “G. K. Chesterton,” 462.

4. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 239; Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 94, 298; Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 52–53; Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Francis of Assisi*, 36, 177; Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, 15–24; Nichols, *Chesterton*, 121–59; Williams, *Mere Humanity*, 15–24.

5. Maycock, “Introduction,” 74.

pessimism.”⁶ Therefore, rather than underplaying the wideness of Chesterton’s gaze regarding the many causes and subjects that he addresses, this idea stresses the fact that the ultimate focus of his way of reading is not on merely propositional or abstract truth, but on a personal relation to truth. He always endeavors to attain a “freshness of perception” that “dignifies and illuminates” any of the present activities of people.⁷ This love of people, which simultaneously expresses love of God, allows for a great deal of exegetical flexibility as in the philosophy of St. Augustine, who allows for any literal and symbolic interpretation even if it is not one intended by an author. For both Chesterton and Augustine, the primary guide for hermeneutics is the rule of love—“the love of God and the love of man.”⁸

As a general rule, Chesterton therefore denigrates any notion or action that would compromise human dignity and applauds any notion or action that promotes it. His “creed” or “gospel of wonder” is one example of something that affirms human dignity because “[m]an is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial.”⁹ Chesterton’s lifelong defense of Christian orthodoxy in general and, later on, Catholic orthodoxy in particular, also comes back to an ideal view of humanity that he finds expressed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰ And his “search for the overall [paradoxical] *logic* of Christian belief” is directly bound to the “incarnational paradox” that is represented by this same person.¹¹ Thus, Chesterton’s affirmation of human immanence is simultaneously an affirmation of divine transcendence, and his affirmation of human dignity is ultimately an affirmation of the goodness of God. He contends that the “common conscience of sane people” is something that is simultaneously “the voice of God” and “the voice of Man.”¹²

However, while Chesterton certainly implies a paradoxical tension between the transcendent and the immanent, his emphasis remains on the immanent as that which is known through direct experience. He is, in this sense, more on the side of Aristotle than he is on the side of Plato, although it should be clear by now that he takes the work of the latter very seriously.¹³

6. McLuhan, “G. K. Chesterton,” 456.

7. Ibid.

8. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, October 1, 1932; St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 80.

9. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 364. Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 100; McLuhan, “G. K. Chesterton,” 455.

10. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 185.

11. Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 117, 177.

12. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Orthodox*, 120.

13. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Francis of Assisi*, 29.

He is critical of Plato and the Neo-Platonists only when they tend “to the view that the mind [is] lit entirely from within”; and prefers the Thomist perspective that the mind is “lit by five windows, that we call the windows of the senses.”¹⁴ It is this light, discovered in the externality of truth, that needs to “shine on what [is] within.”¹⁵ It is through this experience of an external light that man is able to “climb the House of Man, step by step and story by story, until he has come out on the highest tower and beheld the largest vision.”¹⁶ As in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, his metaphysical realism, as that which relentlessly pursues the transcendent, is never separate from “concrete experience, which is always of the senses.”¹⁷

With this in mind, it may be said that even when Chesterton's subject changes to consider the polyphonic and dramatic character of life, his interpretive gaze remains on affirming human dignity. This naturally raises the question of exactly how Chesterton understands human dignity, and it is the aim of this chapter to address this very question. To achieve this aim, three dimensions of what Chesterton regards as central to human dignity are discussed below, namely the defense of the “old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable” common man, the defense of common sense, and the defense of democracy.¹⁸

In Defense of the Common Man

With joking-seriousness Chesterton proposes that, “[r]oughly speaking, there are three kinds of people in this world.”¹⁹

The first kind of people are People; they are the largest and probably the most valuable class. We owe to this class the chairs we sit down on, the clothes we wear, the houses we live in; and, indeed (when we come to think of it), we probably belong to this class of people ourselves. The second class may be called for convenience the Poets; they are often a nuisance to their families, but, generally speaking, a blessing to mankind. The third class is that of the Professors or Intellectuals; sometimes described as the thoughtful people; and these are a blight and a desolation both to their families and also to mankind. Of course, the

14. Ibid., 148–49.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. von Balthasar, “Transcendentality and Gestalt” 34.

18. Ahlquist, *Common Sense* 101, 155; Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 70.

19. Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions*, 70.

classification sometimes overlaps, like all classification. Some good people are almost poets and some bad poets are almost professors. But the division follows lines of real psychological cleavage. I do not offer it lightly. It has been the fruit of more than eighteen minutes of earnest reflection and research.²⁰

Chesterton deepens this playful and overlapping classification by arguing that people are bound by various ethical commonplaces and a grounded clarity that comes from living in the world without trying to explain too much of it. He seems here to be particularly wary of those totalizing schemas that certain modernists are so fond of. This clarity celebrates things like “hilarity,” “a regard for helplessness,” “sentiment,” “pity, dramatic surprise, a desire for justice, a delight in experiment and the indeterminate.”²¹ This celebration, which unites the emotional, ethical, and mysterious dimensions of human experience, underscores the fact that ordinary people live by subtle ideas even if they fail to convey their ideas with any subtlety.

The second class of people participate in the sentiments of ordinary people, but find that they are able to express the subtle ideas of people with genuine subtlety: “The Poets carry the popular sentiments to a keener and more splendid pitch; but let it always be remembered that they are popular sentiments that they are carrying. . . . The Poets are those who rise above the people by understanding them.”²² This is not to say that poets are necessarily writers or that they necessarily write poetry, but rather that they are simply the kind of people who engage with life in the world with more imagination and with a more acute awareness than is ordinarily found among the mob. Their “[p]oetry is that separation of the soul from some object, whereby we can regard it with wonder.”²³ The third class of people, professors or intellectuals, are those people who tend to be somewhat detached from the sensibilities of the masses. They possess ideals of their own, but their ideals lose track of the commonplace sensibilities and realities that most other people have to live with.

One cannot understand Chesterton until one understands that he is primarily concerned with combating the theories of this educated class of people, who are really people who have forgotten that they are people. In fact, Chesterton’s worldview is understood largely as the antithesis of the vague ideologies of many of the intellectuals of his time.²⁴ For dramatic em-

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 71.

23. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 20*, 49.

24. Maycock, “Introduction,” 29.

phasis, Chesterton uses the blanket terms *heresy* or *lunacy* to describe any number of worldviews that override the interests of the common man, and the terms *heretic*, *lunatic*, or *maniac* to describe the one who subscribes to and promotes any such worldview. Such labels may seem harsh to one who is unfamiliar with Chesterton's rhetoric, but there is a fair measure of good humor implied in the use of these melodramatic descriptors. In Chesterton's estimation, even the genius of his close friends—Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), and H. G. Wells, for instance—is regarded affectionately as a kind of madness.

Chesterton's work constantly unpacks the philosophical consequences of the ideas of these and other authors in such a way as to suggest that the authors themselves are not aware of their own philosophical assumptions.²⁵ In this regard, he follows Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), whose ability to expose the assumptions that underpin the reasoning of those around him he holds in particularly high regard even if he does not altogether approve of his brand of hero worship.²⁶ For Chesterton we should always be looking behind the curtain of reasoning to get a sense of the machinery, faulty or not, of thought.

Against this aim, lunacy occurs when thought processes are straitjacketed in such a way as to render reflective self-awareness unlikely. Lunacy is most easily observable in thinking that refuses to expose any "unconscious dogma."²⁷ It seems to be that the "special mark of the modern world" is found not in its skepticism, but in its being "dogmatic without knowing it."²⁸ It mocks "old devotees" for believing "without knowing *why* they believed,"²⁹ but such "moderns believe without knowing *what* they believe—and without even knowing that they do believe it. Their freedom consists in first freely assuming a creed, and then freely forgetting that they are assuming it. In short, they always have an unconscious dogma; and an unconscious dogma is the definition of a prejudice."³⁰

Whatever the limitations of the above classification of people may be, it at least points out that for Chesterton the ideal perspective adopted for preaching and upholding human dignity is the perspective of the poet. His poetic perception, which dwells between the worlds of people and professors, "floats easily in an infinite sea" of subjects and sensibilities, allowing

25. Chesterton, *Twelve Types*, 35; Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 104.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, March 15, 1919.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

for understanding without reductionism.³¹ However, for Chesterton, it is not the extraordinary things that are truly “poetical,” but the “common things.”³² His writings seem to indicate that this poetic perspective is the very ideal that he strives for in his reading of the world. There is one contradiction particularly in McLuhan’s assessment of Chesterton that should be highlighted here. In one instance, McLuhan suggests that Chesterton is an “intellectual poet”³³ and in another instance he contends that Chesterton is “not a poet,” but a “metaphysical moralist.”³⁴ The second assessment, I believe, is misguided because it creates a dichotomy between Chesterton’s philosophical genius and his poetic instinct. Why can he not be *both* a poet *and* a metaphysical moralist? This is an issue that Chesterton addresses in his assessment of Robert Browning when he notes that those who do not like Browning’s work tend to say that he was not a poet, but a philosopher, whereas those who do like Browning’s work tend to suggest, more reasonably, that he was both a philosopher and a poet.³⁵ A particular label is adopted simply as a means to dismiss the thinker in question. Chesterton’s poetic philosophy, which explores many of the heights of human achievement, is always tied to the concerns of ordinary people. He tries to bring intellectuals back down to earth and he tries to elevate the concerns of common folk to new heights of awareness.³⁶

A. L. Maycock observes that “Chesterton has justly been called the poet and the prophet of the man in the street.”³⁷ He often intimates that there is “no such thing as the average man; and scattered throughout his writings there are numerous phrases that express his profound belief in the inalienable dignity of the individual person.”³⁸ He admits that he more easily aligns himself with the “ruck of hard-working people” than with “that special and troublesome literary class” to which he belongs.³⁹ He therefore prefers the “prejudices of the people who see life on the inside to the clearest demonstrations of [those] who [claim to] see life from the outside.”⁴⁰ In this, Chesterton reflects an ideal espoused by Rudyard Kipling in his poem

31. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 220.

32. *Ibid.*, 55.

33. McLuhan, “G. K. Chesterton,” 464.

34. McLuhan, “Introduction,” xxi.

35. Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, 17.

36. McLuhan, “G. K. Chesterton,” 464.

37. Maycock, “Introduction,” 29.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 251.

40. *Ibid.*, 252.

"If": Chesterton manages to "walk with Kings" without losing "the common touch," although his general posture is far less stoical than the one proposed by Kipling in the rest of that poem.⁴¹

From his point of view, enacting the truth of Christianity means recognizing the central, undeniable claim of Christianity: "Whatever else Christianity means or ever meant, it obviously means or meant an interference with the physical sorrows of humanity by the physical appearance of Divinity. If it does not mean that, I cannot conceive what it does mean."⁴² In this recognition—in this understanding that the "strong part of religion" is a "story of bodily manhood, bodily valour, and bodily death"⁴³—he negates the remote position of the professors by invoking the scripture that explains that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), and thereby implies that turning flesh back into mere words is not desirable:

Whenever you hear of things being unutterable and indefinable and impalpable and unnamable and subtly indescribable, then elevate your aristocratic nose towards heaven and snuff up the smell of decay. It is perfectly true that there is something in all good things that is beyond all speech or figure of speech. But it is also true that there is in all good things a perpetual desire for expression and concrete embodiment; and though the attempt to embody is always inadequate, the attempt is always made. If the idea does not seek to be the word, the chances are that it is an evil idea. If the word is not made flesh it is a bad word.⁴⁴

In harmony with Chesterton's approval of concrete expression, Ahlquist observes that his rhetoric is intensely visual so that his words "become flesh" and "spring to life."⁴⁵ This observation aligns with Chesterton's insistence that "[n]o man must be superior to the things that are common to men."⁴⁶ The things that are "common to all men" are in fact "more important than the things peculiar to any men."⁴⁷ The "sense of the miracle of humanity itself should be always more vivid to us than any marvels of power, intellect, art, or civilization" and the simple image of a "man on two legs . . . should be felt as something more heartbreaking than any music and more startling

41. Kipling, *Gunga Din and Other Favorite Poems*, 60.

42. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, February 21, 1914.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 65.

45. Ahlquist, *Common Sense* 101, 53.

46. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, 71.

47. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 249.

than any caricature.”⁴⁸ Man is elevated here above all other things in the whole of creation, including the products of creative thought. As discussed below, this ideal forms the core of Chesterton’s defense of democracy.

Ian Ker observes that Chesterton’s defense of the common man distinguishes him from the misguided Nietzschean arrogance that is found in the work of so many of his contemporaries.⁴⁹ In particular, Chesterton criticizes Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* who exclaims that “[m]an is a thing which needs to be surpassed” because such an injunction implies the end of humanity.⁵⁰ It implies throwing the existing man out of the window and asking for a new kind of man instead of finding out if there is a way to improve the existing man.⁵¹ It also rests upon a nominalist error that forgets universals. “[T]he very word ‘surpass’ implies the existence of a standard common to us and the thing surpassing us.”⁵² And the standard, for Chesterton, must always be that of the ordinary man who is small enough to possess real courage—a courage enough to defeat giants the way that Jack does in the tale of “Jack the Giant-Killer.”⁵³ This ordinary man is not necessarily “normal,” for “[n]obody exactly represents the normal; or even claims to represent the normal.”⁵⁴ Rather, he is the man that one recognizes as an individual member of humanity living in the midst of humanity.

It is the story of smallness raging against bigness that we find truly compelling. Nothing truly inspiring arises from sheer power or sheer force. In fact, one of the central contributions of Christianity is that it is the “only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete.”⁵⁵ Christianity alone felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king and so it “added courage to the virtues of the Creator. For the only courage worth calling courage must necessarily mean that the soul passes a breaking point—and does not break.”⁵⁶ The truly human and the truly heroic imply an adventure, and adventure implies something to overcome. However, the thing to be overcome or surpassed is not the human, but the inhuman. This is what Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* misses and so ends

48. *Ibid.*, 250.

49. Ker, *G. K. Chesterton*, 89.

50. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 80.

51. *Ibid.*, 70, 80.

52. *Ibid.*, 80.

53. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, August 13, 1932.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 212.

56. *Ibid.*

up being “cold and friendless.”⁵⁷ The *Übermensch*, “being unborn,” is really a “dead” thing.⁵⁸ He stands in opposition even to the “[s]ensibility” that is “the definition of life.”⁵⁹ In Chesterton’s opinion, this Nietzschean idealism, like the idealism of the professors discussed above, is tantamount to a kind of conceptual blindness because it dulls perception. It is a form of self-hypnosis that lulls its supporters into being bored by everything.⁶⁰ It refuses to be challenged by anything in the world of experience.⁶¹ Chesterton therefore points out that the Nietzschean ideal ultimately stands directly in the way of “seeing things as they are.”⁶²

The climax of the Nietzschean obsession with superiority is an attitude of general contempt towards things that are deemed inferior. And this, Chesterton argues, is what removes the delight of dramatic surprise that is at the heart of his ideal of human dignity.⁶³ A further critique offered by Chesterton against the ideal of the *Übermensch* is that it is not actually clear what such an ideal really stands for. Nietzsche seems uncertain about what exactly he is aiming at because, especially in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889),⁶⁴ he relies too heavily on metaphors of height and distance instead of considering the actual, commonsense consequences of his philosophy. Thus, instead of striving for a higher good, Nietzsche strives to stand somewhere beyond good and evil.⁶⁵ And “when he describes his hero, he does not dare to say, ‘the purer man,’ or ‘the happier man,’ or ‘the sadder man,’ for all these are ideas; and ideas are alarming. He says ‘the upper man,’ or ‘over man,’ a physical metaphor from acrobats or alpine climbers.”⁶⁶

Basically, Chesterton, who unlike Nietzsche is not blinded by his own metaphors, is not looking for an ideal that stands outside of humanity, but for one that is “more human than humanity itself.”⁶⁷ He does not oppose improvement, which is what writers like Shaw and Wells call for, but insists that any kind of improvement is only possible if it truly celebrates our hu-

57. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, June 1, 1907.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 81.

60. Chesterton, *A Miscellany of Men*, 22–23.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 68.

63. *Ibid.*, 69; *Alarms and Discursions*, 70.

64. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 19.

65. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 309.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 82; Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 204.

manity.⁶⁸ He is not promoting a more detached, more stoical kind of human being, but a human being who experiences life more acutely and more fully. His point is not that ideals are to be done away with, but that the ideals that one holds need to keep with the ideals that support ordinary people.⁶⁹ In the end, a Nietzschean posture towards life and reading the text of life is too aloof to be relevant to human experience, whereas Chesterton's ideal is everywhere in the faces of ordinary people.⁷⁰

For Chesterton, the Nietzschean view is erroneous primarily in its assumption that humanity must be merely an "evolution" and therefore a product of the same chain of material causes and effects that has produced all earthly creatures.⁷¹ This supposed evolution presumes that humanity was something else at one time, an ape of sorts, and will therefore become something else, an *Übermensch* of sorts. However, humanity is not just an evolution, but "a revolution."⁷² Humanity is not just a conservative conclusion to a long process, but an insurrection against the established natural order.⁷³ Humanity represents something "doctrinal" because "it stands to common sense that you cannot upset all existing things, customs, and compromises, unless you believe in something outside them, something positive and divine."⁷⁴ Humanity itself, either by fact or potential, is the word made flesh. Humanity is a living thing that goes against the stream, not a dead thing that goes with it.⁷⁵

What Chesterton is getting at is quite simple: man does not quite fit into the expected scheme of nature, which is to say that man is a hermeneutic anomaly. Therefore, the more one tries to see man merely as an animal, the more one must conclude that he is not merely an animal.⁷⁶ The "simplest" and most obvious truth about man is that he is too odd to be considered the product of purely natural processes.⁷⁷ Man lives and acts in a way that is alien to the life and actions of any other animal.⁷⁸ Unlike the animals, his thoughts turn back to think about themselves; his mind is ob-

68. Clark, *G. K. Chesterton*, 5.

69. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 250.

70. *Ibid.*, 68.

71. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 19, 26.

72. *Ibid.*, 26.

73. *Ibid.*, 320.

74. Chesterton, *Selected Works*, 12.

75. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 256.

76. *Ibid.*, 17.

77. *Ibid.*, 36.

78. *Ibid.*

sessed with secrets and the avoidance or transcendence of bodily realities.⁷⁹ Man is so unnatural that he may well be supernatural. If anything “man is the ape upside down.”⁸⁰

Even the most ordinary man is extraordinary. If man is merely an animal bound to entirely material processes, then there is no reason, either Nietzschean or Darwinian, to see him as being better than any other animal. However, Chesterton does not reject the theory of evolution, which presumes the idea that non-human species survive by a process called natural selection, as long as it is in keeping with Darwin's original thesis.⁸¹ “The point of Darwinism,” he explains, “was not that a bird with a longer beak (let us say) thrust it into other birds, and had the advantage of a duellist with a longer sword.”

The point of Darwinism was that the bird with the longer beak could reach worms (let us say) at the bottom of a deeper hole; that the birds who could not do so would die; and he alone would remain to found a race of long-beaked birds. Darwinism suggested that if this happened a vast number of times, in a vast series of ages, it might account for the difference between the beaks of a sparrow and a stork. But the point was that the fittest did not need to struggle against the unfit. The survivor . . . survived because he alone had the features and organs necessary for survival.⁸²

What Chesterton rejects, however, is the suggestion that “Darwinism [can] explain the human soul—the distinctively human configuration of consciousness and activity.”⁸³ Man is too different from other animals—he is too dignified—to make the Darwinian position on the human spirit plausible. As a theory, Darwinism may be perfectly logical and even plausible on many fronts, but, when it comes to explaining humanity by referring to such things as the “Missing Link” or gaps in the fossil record, it starts to resemble “being on friendly terms with the gap in a narrative or the hole in an argument.”⁸⁴ Accordingly, Chesterton contends that the sincere “agnosticism of Darwin” should be taken more seriously by his followers.⁸⁵

79. Ibid.

80. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 110.

81. Chesterton, *The Well and the Shallows*, 61; Nichols, *Chesterton*, 127.

82. Chesterton, *The Well and the Shallows*, 61.

83. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 51; Nichols, *Chesterton*, 128.

84. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 42.

85. Ibid.

Correspondingly, intellectualism needs a fair dose of humility to resist being blind to its own prejudices.

As an alternative to the Darwinian theory, Chesterton proposes that the idea that best explains the uniqueness of the human creature among animals, and the idea that best supports his ethic of human dignity, is the idea that man is “the image of God.”⁸⁶ If nature is “always looking for something of the supernatural,” the figure of the dignified human being is a good place to start.⁸⁷ Obviously, this is not to propose that man is literally identical in physical likeness to the invisible God, but rather that the image of the dignified man is analogous to the nature of God. Chesterton suggests that an image is “outline” and therefore also a “limit.”⁸⁸ In this particular case, the limitations of human beings have been set by God. They indicate what it is actually possible for a human being to conform to.

Man is the image of God and thus retains a kind of dignity, not because he actually manages to bear that image or stick to its limitations particularly well, but because it is possible for him to work within the outline and limitations evoked by this idea. In particular, man, like God, is limited to being a creator who has a moral nature and the freedom to make his own decisions.⁸⁹ As far as Chesterton is concerned, the notion of human dignity is impossible to sustain apart from his creative, virtuous status. Human dignity is directly bound to what people choose and not just to their ability to choose.⁹⁰

Regarding the things that people choose, Chesterton is more interested in the choices of the common man than he is in the usually insane choices of the “Uncommon Man” like the professor or intellectual in the classification discussed above.⁹¹ While the professor may choose to “found a sect” such as “Malthusianism or Eugenics or Sterilisation” or some other elitist club, the common man probably has no interest in founding such a sect and is therefore probably more likely to found a family.⁹² And while the professor may choose to “publish a newspaper,” the common man would rather “talk about politics in a porthouse or the parlour of an inn” even if he could afford

86. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 35; Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, 42; Nichols, *Chesterton*, 119.

87. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 129.

88. Ahlquist, *Common Sense* 101, 36.

89. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 34.

90. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 241.

91. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 326.

92. *Ibid.*, 321.

to publish a newspaper.⁹³ The common man would, in all likelihood, rather be in the living room playing games with his one-year-old daughter than in his study writing a book.⁹⁴ Perhaps the common man should take a lunch break to do just that before he continues with the next paragraph.

And when he returns to his writing, he would be reminded that Chesterton does not split the pragmatic and the theoretical here. The point he is making is simply that the common man is on the side of developing genuine relationships and connections with the world he lives in and the people he lives with rather than creating barriers between himself and his experience of the world by mere intellectual assent. Moreover, one should not assume that Chesterton is making human experience the measurement of all truth, although it is certainly an important factor in understanding the truth.⁹⁵ For him, truth is ultimately larger than what human experience can account for. Human experience allows for depth and complexity in a way that pure rationalism does not. Truth finding and truth telling are therefore more about “making a map of a labyrinth” than about “making a map of a mist,” which conceals what is there.⁹⁶

For Chesterton, the complexity of human experience is bound to the notion that the common man is the “heir of all the ages.”⁹⁷ Man is heir to a heritage, a history, and a tradition, even if he seems to be “the kind of heir who tells the family solicitor to sell the whole damned estate, lock, stock, and barrel, and give him a little ready money to throw away at the races or the night-clubs.”⁹⁸ By implication, Chesterton suggests that man has a historically-affected consciousness where “forgetting the past” is tantamount to forgetting (and therefore not understanding) both the present and the future.⁹⁹ This historically-affected consciousness is bound to four broadly-defined aspects of the “spiritual story of humanity”: the “spiritual element” in private human experience, the seasonal and ritualistic aspects of life, the communal religious order given to frame these spiritual and ritualistic aspects of life and, finally, the “controversial classification of the Christian system.”¹⁰⁰

93. *Ibid.*, 322.

94. See Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 323.

95. Chesterton, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 201.

96. Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, 3.

97. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 242.

98. *Ibid.*, 242.

99. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, June 18, 1932; Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, November 12, 1932.

100. Chesterton, *In Defense of Sanity*, 243–45.